DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 451 954 PS 029 417

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TITLE Relationship Features and Adolescents' Experience of Closeness in Relationships with Mothers, Fathers, and Friends.
PUB DATE 2001-04-00
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Minneapolis, MN, April 19-22, 2001).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescent Attitudes; Adolescent Development; *Adolescents; Age Differences; Attachment Behavior; Comparative Analysis; Emotional Development; Emotional Response; *Fathers; *Friendship; *Intimacy; *Mothers; *Parent Child Relationship; Peer Relationship; Predictor Variables
IDENTIFIERS *Closeness; Relationship Quality

ABSTRACT

Noting that during adolescence the importance of feeling intimate or close to a relationship partner (mothers, fathers, or friends) increases and that closeness to parents is associated with positive adolescent outcomes, this study examined how features of adolescent relationships are related to adolescents' experience of subjective closeness in relationships with mothers, fathers, and same-sex friends. Participating in the study were 64 seventh graders and 43 tenth graders from a rural school. All participants received parental consent and a stipend of $5.00 for completing a questionnaire regarding relationship features. Five relationship features were assessed: (1) frequency of interaction; (2) diversity of activities; (3) strength of influence; (4) positive and negative emotions; and (5) subjective closeness. Results of regression analyses indicated that relationship features predicted more variability in subjective closeness for tenth graders than for seventh graders, with emotional tone and the quality of interactions appearing to be salient relationship features. Relationship features predicted more variability in relationships with fathers than in relationships with mothers or friends for both age groups. Seventh graders' closeness to fathers was predicted by more frequent interaction with them and a larger diversity of activities. Tenth graders' closeness to fathers was predicted by experiencing positive emotions in the relationship. Seventh graders' closeness to mothers was predicted by greater frequency of interaction. Tenth graders' closeness to mothers was predicted by engaging in more diverse activities with them. Closeness in relationships with friends was predicted by the experience of positive emotions in this relationship for both age groups. (KB)

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Relationship Features and Adolescents' Experience of Closeness In Relationships with Mothers, Fathers, and Friends

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Poster presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, April 2000, Minneapolis, Minnesota

ED 451 954

Introduction

During adolescence increased importance is attached to feeling intimate with or close to a relationship partner (e.g., mother, father, or friend). Intimacy is often thought of as a prototypical feature of adolescents' friendships (Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990) whereas the subjective experience of feeling close has long been considered a hallmark of parent-child relationships (Kelley et al., 1983). Moreover, the experience of feeling close to mothers and fathers is associated with outcomes for adolescents in a number of salient domains (e.g., enhanced academic performance, and lower levels of problem behavior and chemical use; Repinski & Zook 2000; Zook & Repinski, 2000). Consequently, it is important to understand the experiences and relationship features that are associated with adolescents' experience of closeness in relationships with mothers, fathers, and friends.

Some have suggested that the basis for feeling close to a relationship partner during adolescence lies in emotional sharing and the disclosure of personal thoughts and feelings (Buhrmester & Furman 1987). On the other hand, other researchers have proposed that shared activities and time spent together fosters the experience of feeling close to a relationship partner (Camarena, Sarigiani, & Petersen, 1990). In light of these issues, the present study sought to examine how five features of adolescents' relationships (i.e., frequency of interaction, diversity of activities, strength of influence, the experience of positive emotions, and the experience of negative emotions) are related to adolescents' experience of subjective closeness in relationships with mothers, fathers, and same-sex friends. We sought to address two questions: First, are there grade differences in associations between the relationship features and subjective closeness? Second, are there relationship partner differences in associations between the relationship features and subjective closeness?

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Method

Participants

- 64 seventh grade adolescents (35 male, 29 female) from a rural school
- 43 tenth grade adolescents (15 male, 28 female) from a rural school

Procedure

- All participants received parental consent and were given a stipend of $5.00.
- Self-report questionnaires regarding relationship features with mothers, fathers, and same-sex best friends were collected from seventh- and tenth- grade adolescents.

Measures

- **Frequency of Interaction** was assessed using adolescents' reports of the average amount of time per day spent alone with each relationship partner during the past week.

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- **Diversity of Activities** was measured using adolescents' reports of whether or not they did 36 common activities (e.g. "Played sports" and "Did laundry") alone with each relationship partner during the past week.

- **Strength of Influence** was assessed with adolescents' ratings (on a 5-point Likert scale) of the degree to which each relationship partner influenced 45 domains of their lives (e.g. "My beliefs and morals" and "What I do in my free time").

- The **Experience of Positive and Negative Emotions** with each relationship partner was measured using adolescents' reports on the frequency during the past week with which they experienced six positive emotions (e.g. "satisfied" and "excited") and 13 negative emotions (e.g. "frustrated" and "disappointed") on a scale of 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (almost always).

- **Subjective Closeness** was assessed by summing adolescents' responses to two questions regarding their feelings of closeness to each relationship partner on a scale of 1 (not close at all) to 5 (very close):
  -Compared to all your other relationships (friends, siblings, etc.), how would you describe your relationships with your mother?
  -Compared to what you know about other teenagers' relationships with their mothers, how would you describe your relationship with your mother?

Results

Plan of Analysis

Descriptive statistics for the study variables are reported in Table 1. Bivariate correlations between relationship features and adolescents' reports of subjective closeness, by relationship partner (i.e., mother, father, friend) and by grade, are reported in Table 2. The relationship features that were found to correlate significantly with reports of subjective closeness were then entered into regression equations, by relationship partner and by grade, with subjective closeness as the criterion variable (see Table 3).

Correlates of Subjective Closeness (See Table 2)

Seventh-graders' reports

- Subjective closeness in relationships with mothers was positively correlated with frequency of interactions with mothers ($r = .37$, $p \leq .01$), the experience of positive emotions in relationships with mothers ($r = .28$, $p \leq .05$), and negatively correlated with the experience of negative emotions in relationships with mothers ($r = -.30$, $p \leq .05$).

- Subjective closeness in relationships with fathers was positively correlated with frequency of interaction with fathers ($r = .50$, $p \leq .01$), diversity of activities with fathers ($r = .52$, $p \leq .01$), as well as strength of influence of fathers ($r = .55$, $p \leq .01$). Further, subjective closeness was positively correlated with the experience of positive emotions in relationships with fathers ($r = .50$, $p \leq .01$), and negatively correlated with the experience of negative emotions in relationships with fathers ($r = -.48$, $p \leq .01$).

- Subjective closeness in relationships with friends was positively correlated with diversity of activities with friends (r =.25, $p \leq .05$), strength of influence of friends (r = .33, $p \leq .05$), and the experience of positive emotions in relationships with friends (r = .35, $p \leq .01$).

Tenth-graders' reports

- Subjective closeness was positively correlated with frequency of interactions with mothers (r = .35, $p \leq .05$), diversity of activities with mothers (r = .60, $p \leq .01$), as well as strength of influence of mothers (r = .50, $p \leq .01$). Further, subjective closeness was positively correlated with the experience of positive emotions in relationships with mothers (r = .56, $p \leq .01$) and negatively correlated with the experience of negative emotions in relationships with mothers (r = -.39, $p \leq .01$).

- Subjective closeness was positively correlated with frequency of interactions with fathers (r = .53, $p \leq .01$), diversity of activities with fathers (r = .70, $p \leq .01$), as well as strength of Influence of fathers (r = .59, $p \leq .01$). In addition, subjective closeness was positively correlated with the experience of positive emotions in relationships with fathers (r = .75, $p \leq .01$) and negatively correlated with the experience of negative emotions in relationships with fathers (r = -.48, $p \leq .01$).

- Subjective closeness was positively correlated with frequency of interactions with friends (r = .35, $p \leq .05$), diversity of activities with friends (r = .48, $p \leq .01$), as well as strength of influence of friends (r = .40, $p \leq .01$). In addition, subjective closeness was positively correlated with the experience of positive emotions in relationships with friends (r = .49, $p \leq .01$).

Regression Results Predicting Subjective Closeness (See Table 3)

Seventh-graders' reports

- Features of relationships with mothers predicted 18% (adjusted R^2) of the variance in adolescents' reports of subjective closeness (F (3,59) = 5.50, $p \leq .01$).
    - Frequency of interaction with mothers made a significant (β = .32, $p \leq .01$) contribution to this prediction.
- Features of relationships with fathers predicted 41% (adjusted R^2) of the variance in adolescents' reports of subjective closeness (F (5,46) = 8.13, $p \leq .001$).
    - At the level of a statistically significant trend, frequency of interaction (β =.25, $p \leq .10$) and diversity of activities (β = .24, $p \leq .10$) made contributions to this prediction.
- Features of relationships with friends predicted 11% (adjusted R^2) of the variance in adolescents' reports of subjective closeness (F (3,54) = 3.35, $p \leq .05$).
    - At the level of a statistically significant trend, the experience of positive emotions in relationships with friends (β = .23, $p \leq .10$) made a contribution to this prediction.

Tenth-graders' reports

- Features of relationships with mothers predicted 36% (adjusted R^2) of the variance in adolescents' reports of subjective closeness (F (5,35) = 5.43, $p \leq .001$).
    - Diversity of activities ($\beta = .34$, $p \leq .05$) with mothers made a significant contribution to this prediction.
- Features of relationships with fathers predicted 67% (adjusted R^2) of the variance in adolescents' reports of subjective closeness (F (5,32) = 15.67, $p \leq .001$).
    - The experience of positive emotions in relationships with fathers ($\beta = .48$, $p \leq .001$) emerged as a highly significant predictor.
- Features of relationships with friends predicted 29% (adjusted R^2) of the variance in adolescents' reports of subjective closeness (F (4,35) = 4.93, $p \leq .01$).
    - The experience of positive emotions in relationships with friends ($\beta = .31$, $p \leq .05$) made a significant contribution to this prediction.

Discussion

Are there grade differences in associations between the relationship features and subjective closeness?

- Relationship features predicted more variability in subjective closeness for adolescents in tenth grade. The emotional tone and the quality of interactions in older adolescents' relationships appear to be salient relationship features. In contrast, other relationship features not assessed in the current study predict the experience of closeness for seventh graders. This difference may be due to the increasingly differentiated nature of social relationships as adolescents mature (Collins & Repinski, 1994).

Are there relationship partner differences in associations between the relationship features and subjective closeness?

- Relationship features predicted more variability in relationships with fathers than in relationships with mothers or friends for both seventh- and tenth-graders.

Fathers

- Grade differences were evident in the predictors of adolescents' reports of subjective closeness in relationships with fathers.
    - Seventh graders' reports of more frequent interaction with fathers and a larger diversity of activities with fathers predicted subjective closeness.
    - Tenth graders' reports of subjective closeness in relationships with fathers were predicted by the experience of positive emotions in this relationship.

Mothers

- Adolescents' reports of subjective closeness in relationships with mothers were predicted by the interactional features of the relationship.
    - Seventh graders' reports of subjective closeness were predicted by greater frequency of interaction.
    - Tenth graders' reports of subjective closeness were predicted by adolescents' reports of engaging in more diverse activities alone with mothers.

Friends

- Reports of subjective closeness in relationships with friends was predicted by adolescents' reports of the experience of positive emotions in this relationship for both seventh- and tenth-graders.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the Study Variables

	7th Grade		10th Grade	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Mothers				
Frequency of Interaction	450.21	268.21	326.66	184.80
Diversity of Activities	13.59	5.40	10.28	5.12
Strength of Influence	3.37	.70	2.79	.61
Experience of Positive Emotions	3.95	.62	3.50	.92
Experience of Negative Emotions	1.74	.57	1.97	.61
Subjective Closeness	8.28	1.69	7.51	2.24
Fathers				
Frequency of Interaction	305.58	240.48	168.10	140.79
Diversity of Activities	10.92	7.33	5.73	4.01
Strength of Influence	2.94	1.09	2.17	.82
Experience of Positive Emotions	3.66	1.00	3.05	1.07
Experience of Negative Emotions	1.74	.88	1.90	.87
Subjective Closeness	7.29	2.26	5.95	2.71
Friends				
Frequency of Interaction	307.59	214.11	406.51	548.16
Diversity of Activities	12.14	7.52	12.23	6.81
Strength of Influence	2.11	.80	2.00	.55
Experience of Positive Emotions	3.78	.89	3.71	.84
Experience of Negative Emotion	1.30	.31	1.43	.48
Subjective Closeness	8.06	1.52	8.31	1.58

Table 2: Bivariate Correlations of Relationship Features with Subjective Closeness by Grade

	7th Grade	10th Grade
	r	*r*
Mothers		
Frequency of Interaction	37**	35*
Diversity of Activities	11	60**
Strength of Influence	15	50**
Experience of Positive Emotions	28*	56**
Experience of Negative Emotions	-30*	-39**
Fathers		
Frequency of Interaction	50**	53**
Diversity of Activities	52**	70**
Strength of Influence	55**	59**
Experience of Positive Emotions	50**	75**
Experience of Negative Emotions	-48**	-48**
Friends		
Frequency of Interaction	18	35*
Diversity of Activities	25*	48**
Strength of Influence	33*	40**
Experience of Positive Emotions	35**	49**
Experience of Negative Emotions	-08	25

Note: -decimal points are omitted;
-* = $p \leq .05$; ** = $p \leq .01$

Table 3: Standardized Regression Coefficients for Predicting Adolescents' Subjective Closeness in Relationships with Mothers, Fathers, and Friends

7th Grade	Mothers	Fathers	Friends
Frequency of Interaction	.32**	.25+	-
Diversity of Activities	-	.24+	.03
Strength of Influence	-	.14	.24
Experience of Pos. Emotions	.17	.10	.23+
Experience of Neg. Emotions	-.18	-.19	-
Adj. R^2	.18*	.41***	.11*

10th Grade	Mothers	Fathers	Friends
Frequency of Interaction	.08	.20	.23
Diversity of Activities	.34*	.21	.11
Strength of Influence	.14	.08	.25
Experience of Pos. Emotions	.19	.48***	.31*
Experience of Neg. Emotions	-.10	-.11	-
Adj. R^2	.36***	.67***	.29**

Note: + = $p \leq .10$; * = $p \leq .05$; ** = $p \leq .01$; *** = $p \leq .001$